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DE RUEHRB #0425/01 1331223
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FM AMEMBASSY RABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8556
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHAS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS 4783
RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAMAKO 0103
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO 2363
RUEHRY/AMEMBASSY CONAKRY 0001
RUEHDK/AMEMBASSY DAKAR 0454
RUEHLC/AMEMBASSY LIBREVILLE 0652
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 5980
RUEHNC/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 3744
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 4081
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 9621
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RABAT 000425

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SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/MAG
JOINT STAFF FOR CNE-C6F

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/07/2015

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SUBJECT: MOROCCAN NAVY ACCUSED OF DELIBERATELY DROWNING 30 SUB-SAHARAN
MIGRANTS

REF: A) CASABLANCA 0071
B) 07 CASABLANCA 0193

Classified By: Principal Officer Douglas C. Greene for Reasons 1.4 (b),
(d).

11. (C) Summary: According to survivors, two hours after an early morning clandestine launch from the northern town of El Hoceima, either Moroccan Navy or security force officials deliberately stabbed holes in a zodiac carrying more than 70 illegal sub-Saharan migrants, leaving more than 30 dead. Moroccan officials have vehemently denied involvement in the sinking of the boat, which occurred on April 28. To the contrary, they claim to have been responsible for rescuing a number of those in jeopardy. Human rights organizations in the region have been unable to determine the facts surrounding the incident but have indicated that the Moroccan vessel may have been involved in the sinking of the craft. They have also called for the GOM to further investigate the incident. End Summary.

Some Survivors Tell a Tragic Tale

12. (C) Interviews with some survivors appear to support recent reports that in the early morning hours of April 28, approximately 30 sub-Saharan migrants drowned while attempting to cross the Mediterranean and enter Spain. According to Pastor David Brown (protect), who assists sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco, up to 36 people may have died in the incident. Pastor Brown's representative in Oujda, a northern Moroccan city located near the Algerian border where migrants often find refuge, has spoken to three survivors of the incident, all of whom tell the same story.

13. (C) Three Nigerian survivors claimed that they were two hours offshore in a zodiac-style boat, overcrowded with approximately 70 people, when Moroccan authorities approached their vessel. They accuse the Moroccans of stabbing holes in their craft which, according to one, sank like a stone. The survivors said they were rescued by another Moroccan boat before being arrested and deported to the Algerian border. After being dropped in the desert, the Nigerians made their way back to Oujda to seek help from Brown's colleague. The three also claimed that a second boat escaped unharmed and successfully crossed to Spain.

Morocco Categorically Denies Allegations

14. (C) The very first report of the drowning deaths occurred on April 28, the day of the incident, when the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) circulated a press release saying that ten sub-Saharanans were found dead off the coast of El Hoceima during a rescue operation by the Royal Navy. In addition to the bodies, the MOI reported that the Royal Navy rescued 124 sub-Saharanans and 24 Moroccans (this number was later reported as 193 total) from three boats on the same day. An Embassy contact and journalist speculated that the announcement of the drowning of 10 sub-Saharanans was highly unusual and may have indicated that there was more to the situation than initially reported.

15. (C) However, the situation heated up after a May 7 article in the Spanish newspaper El Pais, which published allegations of a deliberate sinking of the clandestine vessel. In response, Kahaled Naciri, Minister of Communication and official spokesman for the GOM, formally denied all accusations made against the Moroccan Navy regarding its role in the drowning deaths of from 10 to 30-plus sub-Saharan migrants. Naciri told French-language daily Le Soir, that the Royal Navy was not behind this tragedy. To the contrary, it intervened at a good moment, when the boat began taking on water, to save human lives and lend a strong hand to the survivors. Embassy Naval Attach learned Friday, however, that a senior official of the Royal Moroccan Navy is in Nador overseeing an investigation.

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Who to Believe?

16. (C) According to the Moroccan Association of Human Rights (AMDH) office in Oujda, the actual cause of the sinking is still unclear. Interviews with several of the survivors revealed conflicting versions of the incident. Some victims testified that the authorities slashed holes in their craft while others reported that their boat was damaged when it ran into the Moroccan patrol boat's propellers. The AMDH was only able to confirm that an incident did occur and that, according to them, ten people drowned and 160 were rescued.

17. (C) On May 9, Amnesty International called on the GOM to open an investigation into the incident. Amnesty's representative in Oujda claimed that reports from survivors confirm that 28 people, including four children between the ages of two and four, died as a result of their boat being jostled and punctured by members of the Moroccan security forces. The migrants told Amnesty that the stabbing of the boat was in response to their refusal to stop when ordered to do so by the Moroccan Naval or security forces as they attempted to reach international waters.

Comment

18. (C) Nearly two weeks after the incident occurred the facts are still unclear. Information from the independent AMDH and Amnesty International appears to indicate that the Moroccan Navy or security forces could have been involved in the sinking of the migrants boat, either deliberately or accidentally. The current naval investigation may provide clarifying details. In any event, this tragic incident highlights the tensions between Moroccan authorities and the increasing population of clandestine sub-Saharanans in Morocco. Moroccan authorities are stretched to the limit guarding against both illegal migration and terrorism. At the same time, sub-Saharan, as well as an increasing number of Asian, clandestine migrants still see Morocco as the highway to Europe's El Dorado and a better future. Increasing global food price and struggling economies may increase pressure to migrate north, further aggravating the situation on Morocco's Mediterranean shore.
End Comment.

GREENE